

REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

WATERBURY, CT
DAILY 61,000

WEDNESDAY
AUG 4 1999

NEW ENGLAND NEWSCLIP AGENCY, INC.



RDMS DocID 00100836

Editorials

RCRA RECORDS CENTER
FACILITY MACDERMID
I.D. NO. CTD001164599
FILE LOC. R-8
OTHER RDMS# 100836

Picking on MacDermid

The bureaucrats can bleat to their hearts' content about alleged environmental violations by MacDermid Inc. But for Waterbury residents in general and MacDermid, one of the city's biggest employers, *in particular, what stands out are two dates and the spans of time connecting them with the present.*

The first date is November 1994, when the specialty-chemicals manufacturer accidentally spilled 1,500 gallons of copper etchant into the Naugatuck River. Eleven thousand fish died, but no human injuries or deaths resulted. Nor was the damage long term; nor did MacDermid attempt to cover up the mishap.

The second date is February 1998. That's the last time MacDermid committed a violation of any kind — substantive or technical.

MacDermid handles corrosive and hazardous substances but hasn't caused environmental damage in almost five years. And it has been in full compliance with state law for the past year and a half, even though state law is at times unreasonable. Case in point: MacDermid cannot *discharge city water directly into the Naugatuck River*, even when that water has been used solely for cooling and has not been contaminated.

Whatever its past offenses, for which it has paid hundreds of thousands in fines and reparations, MacDermid is complying with both the letter and the spirit of environmental law today. It is also providing a living for hundreds of Greater Waterbury residents and critically needed property-tax dollars for city schools, public safety, public works and other services.

So why is it now facing legal action by the state?

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, who filed the lawsuit, is a notorious publicity hound and a

hyperactive litigator. His motives for suing MacDermid are obvious.

The Department of Environmental Protection's goals are less clear. Perhaps DEP Commissioner Arthur Rocque and the John G. Rowland administration never got over the verbal thrashing from Democratic candidate Barbara Kennelly and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials for letting MacDermid get off with a \$70,000 reparation in the 1994 fish-kill incident.

But hindsight is instructive here. Those who defended the arrangement, including this newspaper, predicted the velvet hand would work better than the iron fist where it counted — in encouraging MacDermid to run a clean shop. And it has. The record of the past year and a half exposes no longstanding record of willful environmental violations; no incidents of careless handling of hazardous substances; not even paper violations.

With a record like that, MacDermid ought to get an award, not an invitation to defend itself in court. In fact, MacDermid *did* get an award — a second-place environmental award of merit at the Safety, Health and Environment Conference sponsored in April by the Connecticut Business and Industry Association. It has also won accolades for funding a full-time river steward to monitor and improve the Naugatuck River's habitat.

As outraged as business leaders should be over the lawsuit against MacDermid, environmentalists ought to be linking arms with them. A big part of effective environmental enforcement is picking your spots. Picking on a company with a spotless record stretching back a year and a half is not only unfair, but it's a recipe for failure in the quest for clean air and water.

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